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GARDEN

Transplant with confidence

A few simple steps will assure a healthy young tree

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THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

February in these parts means cloudy skies, damp ground and frequent rain.

Great weather, if you're a newly planted tree.

"The worse it is for people to be outside, the better it is for trees to be moving around or transplanted," says Isaiah Webb, a Washington Conservation Corps crew supervisor. Webb estimates his crew will plant more than 6,000 trees this season.

Mild winter days are excellent for tree planting. Many trees go into a dormant state for the winter, which means they are less vulnerable to the shock of being transplanted. And if planters can establish them in the ground now, trees have months to thrive on the rains of spring, Webb says.

PLANTING HELP

To contact the Whatcom County Master Gardeners, call 676-6736 weekdays between 9 a.m. and noon or e-mail mgwhat@cahnrs.wsu.edu.

"As soon as the good weather in spring hits, they can get established immediately."

Here's a step-by-step guide to the basics of planting trees on your property:

Research the site. How much light does it get? Is it damp or dry? Is the soil sandy, loamy or clay? All these factors and more will influence how well trees survive.

Research the tree. Find one that will thrive in your property. Talk to tree nursery owners or the Whatcom County Master Gardeners - expert gardeners who volunteer to answer questions. Find out about tree diseases

that might affect how your tree grows. And make sure it grows to the size you want.

"It really will grow as tall as the label says. People never believe that," says Cheryl Greenwood Kinsley, a Bellingham-based master gardener.

Wildlife make a difference in planting strategies too, says Frank Bob, habitat restoration assistant for the Lummi Indian Business Council's natural resources department, which is planting about 7,000 trees this season.

For example, deer love to eat cedar seedlings. So when Bob's crew is planting in deer-rich areas on the upper reaches of the Nooksack River, they plant cedars together with young spruce trees.

"I think their noses get poked by the needles of the spruce," Bob says.

Prepare the ground. Before you buy your tree, clear weeds that might encroach on the tree, then dig the hole. If you are planting a bare-root tree - one which comes with its roots in a plastic or burlap bag, dig a deep hole and then make a cone of dirt in the bottom. Save the remaining dirt. You'll need it later.

Work quickly. Plant the tree as quickly as possible. Take off the bag holding the roots, shake it gently and put it in the hole, so that the roots spread around the cone. Water it. When the water has soaked in, fill the hole with the dirt you dug out of it.

Do not add store-bought potting soil.

"The tree will never want to leave it," Kinsley says. Instead of spreading out and down, the tree's roots will grow around in a circle, and eventually they will no longer be able to support the tree.

Do not stamp down the dirt.

Other steps. If the tree needs it, tie it to a post to keep it growing straight the first year. Depending on the setting, you may need to take other measures, ranging from spiral wraps to protect against meadow voles, to special fences to ward off beavers.

Let the tree grow. Once you've cut off branches damaged in transport, don't prune it, Kinsley says. And don't fertilize it.

"Don't do anything else to that poor tree," Kinsley says. "It's been through enough."

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